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Select panel finds no evidence of Contra drug trafficking

U.S. officials and citizens 'exhaustively examined'

By Mary Belcher
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The Iran-Contra investigative committee has found no evidence to support allegations that Nicaraguan Resistance leaders were involved in drug smuggling.

In a memo released yesterday, committee investigators said they "exhaustively examined" the role of U.S. officials and private citizens involved with the resistance forces, as well as that of rebel leaders.

The probe included interviews with hundreds of people in the United States and Central America and reviews of their files and other documents.

"Despite numerous newspaper

accounts to the contrary, no evidence was developed indicating that Contra leadership or Contra organizations were actually involved in drug trafficking," wrote investigator Robert A. Bermingham in a July 23 memo to Iran-Contra committee leaders.

"There was no information developed indicating any U.S. government agency or organization condoned drug trafficking by the Contras or anyone else," Mr. Bermingham stated.

Committee investigators did not address allegations of drug smuggling by Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista government.

Mr. Bermingham recommended that the Iran-Contra panel defer to ongoing investigations by independent counsel Lawrence Walsh, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Judiciary Committee's crime subcommittee.

Committee spokesman Robert Havel said panel leaders will follow Mr. Bermingham's recommendations and cooperate with the ongoing probes.

The Iran-Contra investigators reviewed files from the State, Defense and Justice departments, and from the CIA, FBI, National Security Council, Drug Enforcement Administration and Customs Bureau.

They also interviewed Nicaraguan resistance leaders and examined their bank records.

"Examination of Contra financial records, private enterprise business records and income tax returns of several individuals failed to locate any indication of drug trafficking," Mr. Bermingham said.

He said nearly all of the allegations "originate from persons in-

dicted or convicted of drug smuggling."

"Justice has stated that such persons are more and more claiming, as a defense, that they were smuggling for the benefit of the Contras in what they believed was a U.S. government-sponsored operation," he said.

"Typically, they furnish no information which can be corroborated by investigation."

Mr. Bermingham said the Iran-Contra panel's investigation did not examine whether resistance forces have been "independently or individually involved in drug trafficking."

He said the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control have been examining such allegations.

Alan Fiers, chief of the CIA's Central American task force, told the committee in private testimony released yesterday that no CIA officers or U.S. officials were involved in drug trafficking.

But he said members of one-time rebel leader Eden Pastora's organization did engage in cocaine smuggling. Mr. Fiers said that was one of several reasons the United States severed ties with the Pastora group.

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